Review of *Distributed Blackness: African American Cybercultures* by André Brock, Jr. (New York University Press)

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ABSTRACT   In *Distributed Blackness: African American Cybercultures*, interdisciplinary scholar André Brock, Jr. offers a timely and powerful examination of Blackness in the digital age. The book centers Black technology use from Black perspectives and investigates the online distribution of Black discourses. In six exploratory chapters, Brock reconceptualizes Black technoculture in a way that corrects deficit models of Black digital practice.

KEYWORDS   technology, race, Blackness, internet, media discourse, digital media

Distributed Blackness: African American Cybercultures. By André Brock, Jr. New York: New York University Press, 2020. 288 pp. (paperback) IBSN 9781479829965. US List: $29.00.

André Brock, Jr.'s latest book, *Distributed Blackness: African American Cybercultures*, is an interdisciplinary work offering compelling possibilities for studying Black digital practices and information experiences. Brock connects linguistics, rhetoric, and critical race theory with computer-mediated communication research through the lens of critical technocultural discourse analysis (CTDA) to provide a cultural and racial framework for examining technology. He invites researchers to study the intersectionality of race and technology beyond the notions of absence and resistance. Brock writes, "racism is not the sole defining characteristic of Black identity" (x). He wants readers to think through the expressions of joy in everyday life African Americans extol on the internet. In a way, *Distributed Blackness* is a call for joy.

Brock structures *Distributed Blackness* as part of a legacy of Black informational projects such as *The Negro Motorist Green Book* (1936–66). Brock argues that while the *Green Book* imagined the US highway system as a Black technological network to resist white racial violence and hegemony and a guide to safe spaces that would help Black travelers, the internet does not offer the same physical potential for discrimination and anti-Black racism. However, there is still a dire need for "safe spaces" for Black folks seeking information, connecting with others, and expressing themselves online; thus, Brock sets out to answer the critical question: "How, then, do the internet and digital media mediate Blackness?"

One of the most significant things Brock does across this work is to demonstrate how Black folks have always been in online spaces and how they have made the internet a "Black space" while also decentering whiteness as the default internet identity and defying technocultural beliefs of Black primitiveness. In another significant contribution, *Distributed Blackness* recognizes that the libidinal energies of antiblackness and necropolitics drive the political economy of racism mediated through information and communication technologies (ICTs). Brock argues that these libidinal features of Western technoculture must be examined and revised to account for Black culture and digital activity. In doing so, he suggests revisiting Joel Dinerstein's matrix of six elements that underpin Western technoculture: whiteness, masculinity, religion, progress, modernity, and the future.[1] Since the presumed whiteness of American and Western technical identity that Dinerstein describes cannot account for Blackness and technology, Brock restructures the technocultural matrix to unpack Black digital practice. Brock suggests that six categories constitute the Black technocultural matrix: Blackness, intersectionality, America, invention/style, modernity, and the future. Brock theorizes "a Black cultural relationship with technology, drawing on the Black experience in the West–an experience that is shaped by relationships with whiteness and with technology" (228). The Black digital practice that Brock describes is a sphere for Black life and joy structured against the dominance and control of Black bodies.

Methodology is another significant contribution of this project. Brock uses CTDA, which examines technology use from the perspective of marginalized and underrepresented groups, to form this conceptualization of a Black techno- and cyber-cultural matrix. This method illuminates what the technology is doing and how people understand themselves through their relationship to the technology. Brock also draws together theory on the rhetorics of Black discourse as identity, the metaphysics of Blackness, the libidinal possibilities of Blackness, and Black feminism. Brock's intersectional methodology can serve as a model for other scholars of ICT. Brock suggests that internet studies would be much more impactful if academics were explicit about the whiteness of the online communities they studied.

Chapter 1 unpacks the uses of CTDA and also the concepts, such as libidinal economy, that underpin the book. This chapter provides a literature review of critical qualitative scholarship examining race, digital media, and technoculture. In this chapter, readers are introduced to the term *libidinal economy*, drawn from the work of Jared Sexton, Fred Moten, and Frank Wilderson. Libidinal economy is a powerful tool to understand Black uses of information technology and to counter rationalistic and modernist IT theories, which contain pejorative beliefs about nonwhite users, leading to either deficit models of technology use or over-celebrating nonwhite resistance skills. Libidinal economy, argues Brock, "provides a path toward conceptualizing Black technology use as a space for mundanity, banality, and the celebration of making it through another day" (10).

Chapters 2 and 3 use CTDA to establish a matrix of Black cyberculture and examine intersections of race and the digital, emphasizing the heterogeneity of Black online existences. In Chapter 2, Brock uses the Blackbird browser as an example to explore how software applications shape Black identity. Shifting to social networking services, Chapter 3 addresses a rarely asked question: "What would a Black online network look like?"

Brock's answer is Black Twitter, which utilizes Black discursive identity to position the service as an emotional construct that focuses on shared pathos and catharsis.

Brock's conceptualization of the libidinal economy is the emphasis of the second half of the book. Chapters 4 and 5 synthesize earlier chapters on Black technoculture into a conceptual framework of Black digital discursive practice. Drawing on Black aesthetics, Chapter 4 theorizes Black digital practice through "ratchetry," a "digital practice born of everyday banal political behavior that is rooted in Black culture and discourse" (126). Brock focuses on the sensuality of Black digital practice stating that Black folks enact their cultural identity online because they find joy in being Black; thus his definition of *ratchetry* in this chapter incorporates a "libidinal component of pleasure" (128). Chapter 5 continues theorizing Black digital practice by delving into online Black respectability, using Ayesha Curry's tweets as a case study. By analyzing the Black audiences' reception, Brock demonstrates that social networking services like Twitter allow Black community members to vocalize a modern politics of respectability via digital means to police the behaviors of Black folks. Chapter 6 furthers the possibility of libidinal economies of information technology to build out a Black technocultural matrix. This final chapter articulates Brock's main argument about Black digital practice as "vitality, energy, and occasionally, joy" (15). To examine how Black people make sense of their existence as users and understand the joy and pleasure in Black digital practice, this chapter places Black folks at the center of ICT use, incorporating libidinal economy for this analysis.

In advocating for more research about the ethos and ideals of Black technoculture, Brock demonstrates how beliefs about Black Americans as deviant versions of white Americans have been transformed by the political and cultural prowess of Black digital practice on social media services, particularly on Twitter. Brock aspires to change the outdated perception that Black Americans have less "civilized" or "sophisticated" online information uses and behaviors. This book's main argument for theorizing Black technoculture should be understood as a corrective to deficit models of Black digital practice. Brock's reimagination of Black technoculture is an invitation to researchers who want to better understand Black digital practice.

Notes

1. Joel Dinerstein (2006). "Technology and Its Discontents: On the Verge of the Posthuman," American Quarterly 58(3): 569–595. https://www.jstor.org/stable/40068384 < https://www.jstor.org/stable/40068384> . ↩

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